

Number of Hired Farmworkers Increases, but Their Median Weekly Earnings Show Little Improvement

After decreasing during the first half of the 1990's, the number of hired farmworkers employed has increased since 1994. Although their median weekly earnings have increased since 1994, they have still lost ground compared with real 1990 earnings. Hired farmworkers accounted for less than 1 percent of the U.S. wage and salary work force, but they accounted for almost 2 percent of the Nation's unemployed.

Hired farmworkers, while less than 1 percent of all wage and salary workers, account for about one-third of the production agricultural work force. Operators and their unpaid family members account for the remaining two-thirds. More importantly, hired farmworkers provide the labor at critical production times when operators and family members are unable to supply the necessary labor. Relative to the type of work performed by many wage and salary workers, hired farmwork is often seasonal, is usually performed outdoors, involves lifting and carrying heavy objects, and pays substantially less. Hired farmworkers include persons who reported their primary employment during the week as farm managers (8 percent), supervisors of farmworkers (4 percent), nursery workers (2 percent), and farmworkers engaged in planting, cultivating, and harvesting crops or tending to livestock (86 percent).

Number of Hired Farmworkers in 1996 Largest of the 1990's

After continually decreasing from 1990 to 1994, the annual average number of hired farmworkers (15 and older) employed per week increased in 1996 to 906,000, an increase of about 14 percent over the decade-low 793,000 in 1994 (fig. 1). Accompanying this change was a 13-percent increase in the hired farmwork force (persons, employed or unemployed, who reported their primary employment is or was hired farmwork), from 903,000 in 1994 to 1.02 million in 1996. Consequently, unemployment in the hired farmwork force remained about 12 percent during 1994-96 (unemployment in the U.S. work force averaged about 5.5 percent during the same time period).

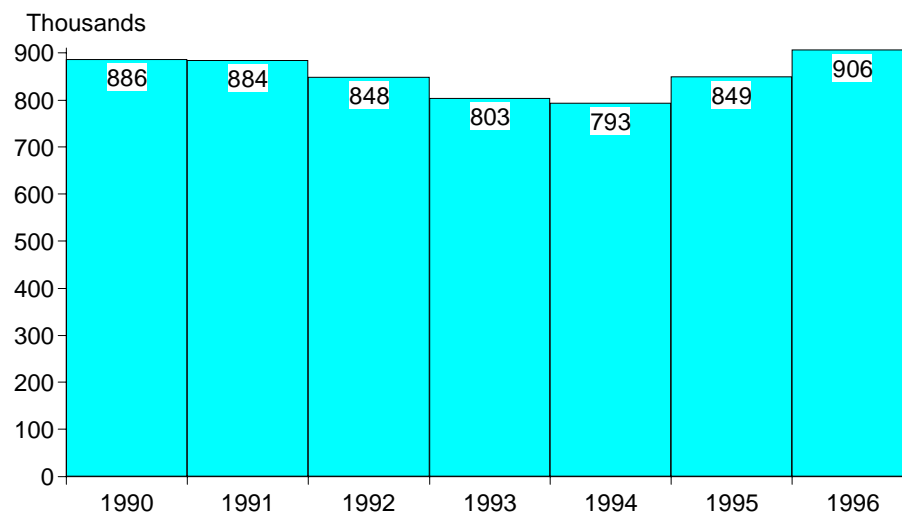
Demographic Characteristics of Hired Farmworkers Vary Among Groups of Workers

Hired farmworkers in 1996 were more likely than all wage and salary workers to be male, younger, never married, and less educated (app. tables 11 and 12). They were also more

Figure 1

Annual average number of hired farmworkers, 15 years of age and older, employed per week, 1990-96

The number of hired farmworkers employed has increased since 1994



Source: Calculated by ERS using data from the Current Population Survey earnings microdata file.

likely than all wage and salary workers to be Hispanic (36 percent compared with about 10 percent) and to be foreign nationals who are citizens of other countries (28 percent compared with 7 percent). These workers were employed in crop production (50 percent), livestock production (40 percent), and other agricultural establishments (10 percent) such as agricultural services, forestry, fishing, hunting, trapping, landscape and horticultural services, and other agricultural-related establishments. About 98 percent of the non-citizen hired farmworkers were Hispanic (54 percent for all wage and salary workers). A greater percentage of the noncitizen hired farmworkers (about 79 percent) had 8 years or less education than all hired farmworkers (33 percent) (figs. 2 and 3). The education level of the noncitizen hired farmworkers continued to pull down the level of education of the entire hired farmwork force. Most noncitizen hired farmworkers (70 percent) were employed in crop production. In addition to the 906,000 workers who reported hired farmwork as their primary occupation, 72,000 persons reported hired farmwork as their secondary occupation.

About 704,000 workers (78 percent all employed hired farmworkers) were primarily employed full-time (worked 35 hours or more per week), and 202,000 were primarily employed part-time. Part-time hired farmworkers were more likely than full-time ones to be female, White, younger (median age of 20 years compared with 37 years), never married, and born in the United States. About 53 percent of the part-time workers were employed in livestock production, and 53 percent of full-time workers were employed in crop production.

Over 50 percent of hired farmworkers were employed in crop production, 41 percent in livestock production, and 9 percent in other agricultural establishments. Workers in other agricultural establishments were more likely to be female. Hispanic workers accounted for more than one-half of the crop and other agricultural employees. Livestock workers were younger and better educated than other farmworkers.

Two Percent of Unemployed U.S. Workers Were Hired Farmworkers

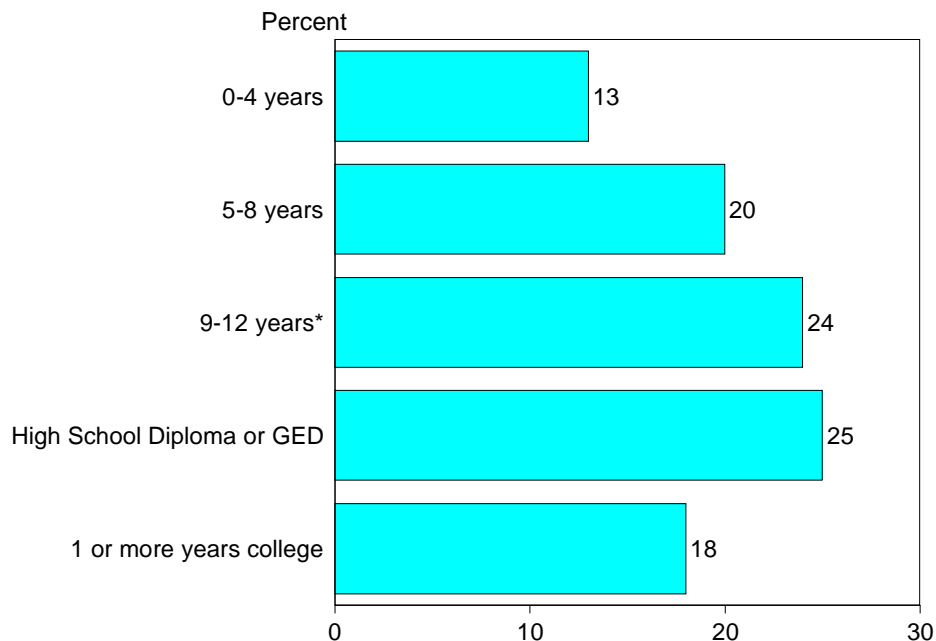
Unemployed in the farmwork force accounted for almost 2 percent of all unemployed in 1996, more than double their percentage of the wage and salary work force. About 23 percent of the unemployed farmwork force were female, 60 percent were Hispanic, and 15 percent were Black and other; 29 percent were 25-34 years of age (median age was 31 years); 53 percent had less than 9 years of education (median was 7th or 8th grade); and 55 percent were noncitizens. About 71 percent of the unemployed farmwork force had been employed in crop production, 22 percent in livestock production, and 7 percent in other agricultural establishments. The high unemployment months in 1996 were February, March, and November.

Hired Farmworker Earnings Remained Lower Than Those for Other Workers

Hired farmworkers continued to earn significantly less than most other workers. Full-time hired farmworkers received median weekly earnings of \$280, or 58 percent of the \$481 median weekly earnings of all wage and salary workers (fig. 4). Median weekly earnings for all full-time wage and salary workers ranged from \$731 for full-time professional specialties to \$200 for private household workers. Only private household workers received lower median weekly earnings than hired farmworkers. Service workers, except private household and protective, had the same median weekly earnings as hired farmworkers. Although weekly earnings for full-time farmworkers declined 2.8 percent between 1990 and 1996 after adjusting for inflation, they have increased 5.6 percent since 1994. Real median earnings for all U.S. full-time wage and salary workers decreased by 0.8 percent from 1990 to 1996 and 1.6 percent from 1994 to 1996.

Hired farmwork is short-term and unsteady due to the seasonal nature of agriculture. This seasonality of employment and low earnings make hired farmwork one of the lowest paying occupational groups. Many hired farmworkers seek nonfarm jobs to supplement their incomes. However, their low education levels and limited labor market skills often make competition for higher wage, nonfarm jobs more difficult.

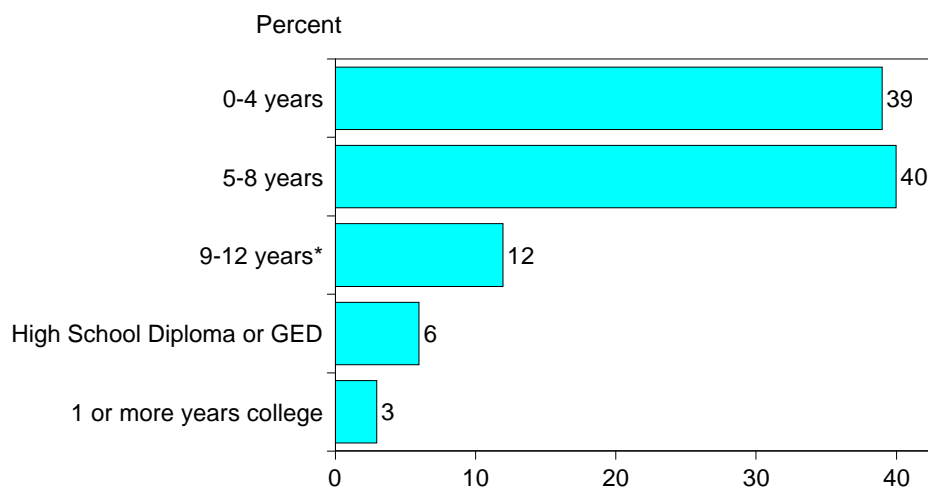
Figure 2

Distribution of hired farmworkers by schooling completed, 1996*More than half of farmworkers have not graduated from high school*

*But did not graduate

Source: Calculated by ERS using data from the 1996 Current Population Survey earnings microdata file.

Figure 3

Distribution of noncitizen hired farmworkers by schooling completed, 1996*Almost three-fourths of noncitizen hired farmworkers have only an elementary education*

*But did not graduate

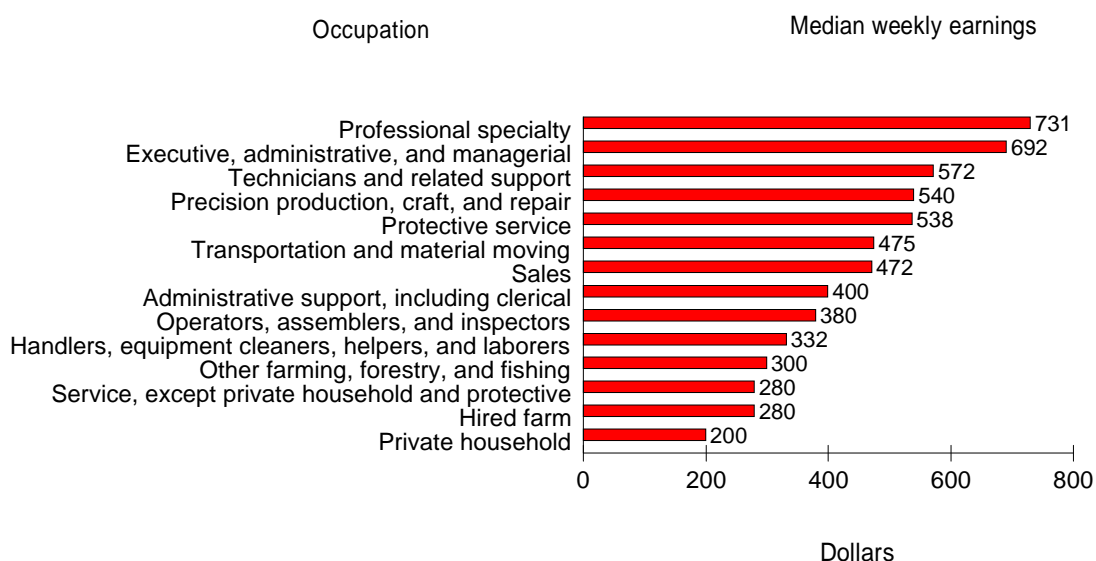
Source: Calculated by ERS using data from the 1996 Current Population Survey earnings microdata file.

During 1990-94, the demand for hired farmworkers apparently declined. Between 1994 and 1996, demand started to rebound, as shown by the increased number of hired farmworkers employed. This change closely parallels the change in real weekly earnings of hired farmworkers. It is not possible to determine from the available data whether the increasing number of workers employed represents an increase in the total number of employment opportunities, a decrease in the number of undocumented workers, or a combination of both. However, the increasing earnings indicates that there is competition for workers as more jobs, both farm and nonfarm, become available and national unemployment declines. [Jack L. Runyan, 202-219-0937 (after October 24, 202-694-5438), jrunyan@econ.ag.gov]

Figure 4

Median weekly earnings of full-time wage and salary workers by occupation, 1996

Hired farmworkers rank near the bottom of major occupational groups



Source: Calculated by ERS using data from the 1996 Current Population Survey earnings microdata file.